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ART IN POETRY.

AND

A CONSIDERATION OF THE POEMS OF HENRY WILLARD AUSTIN.



HENRY WILLARD AUSTIN.

It would be a profitable labor, if it were not obviously an impracticable one, to ascertain the due proportion of conscious art in the best class of poetry. It would be profitable both to the critic and to the student, inasmuch as no accurate estimate of a poet's work can be obtained while the process by which he accomplished it remains concealed.

With this proportion a known and positive quantity, the mysterious equations of modern criticism might so resolve themselves into sheer simplicity as to become intelligible to the common, not to say vulgar, mind.

As the matter now stands, however,—and as it will doubtless always stand until poets take the public un-

reservedly into their confidence,—there is no means of discovering how much art was intentionally employed in the formation of a poem, except from the *prima facie* evidence of the poem itself. This is manifestly an unfair test, for the ultimate perfection of a piece of literary work bears no fixed relation to the amount of labor that constructed it. Consequently, each critic is compelled from the necessities of the case to exercise arbitrarily his own judgment as to how much art, if any at all, was used, with the result that there arises such a lamentable lack of conformity in their various conclusions that the student loses all confidence in the boasted analytical power of the modern critic.

Indeed, the difficulty of determining to what extent a poem is the result of a spontaneous generation or of a rational and conscious evolution appears to be insurmountable. If art means anything at all, it means skill, the dexterous manipulation of material, the predetermined application of rules and principles. Now, who except the author himself shall have the temerity to say whether the poem was conceived and produced by these premeditated means or by an inspired improvisation that transcends all calculation and aforethought? It was certainly

written by one of these two processes or by a combination of both of them; but who shall undertake to say by how much of either?

Unfortunately, we have had little or no direct evidence on this point. Edgar Allan Poe, in two or three of his admirable essays, has undertaken to explain the rationale of verse and to dissect before our very eyes his own methods of work. But Poe's sincerity in this matter is not quite above suspicion. He was always theatric, always posing for the wonder of the multitude; and it is not impossible that it pleased him to astonish not only by his work but by his alleged method of work. Whether he was sincere or not, however, is foreign to the question. His testimony can be accepted as going to show how he produced his own effects, and is to that extent—and to that extent only—valuable. But it does not follow that Poe's manner of poetical composition is the universal manner. We need more testimony, and from more reliable sources, before we can accept the carpenter theory of verse as the true and ultimate one.

Certainly the poem itself is stolidly silent on this point. A most rigid analysis of it fails to reveal whether any recognized mental processes were employed in its development or whether it sprang fully matured from the poet's brain. We cannot tell if many thoughts had presented themselves and been rejected before the great corner-stone of the work was finally chosen, or if the imagery which now stands before us so clear-cut had first come forward cloudy and ill-defined. Who can be sure that there were no interlineations, alterations, and elimi-

nations? With both the creator and the created silent, who shall solve the question?

There is certain internal evidence, however, in many of the longer poems, which would indicate that their construction was the combined result of the two processes under consideration,—the inspired or spontaneous, and the artistic or calculated. A critical analysis of the best long poems of the English language will, as far as I myself have been able to examine them, show that they are composed of a varyingly numerous series of inspired passages, the spaces between being more or less artistically padded with forced phrases, which by their inherent inferiority indicate a different origin and considerably reduce the average excellence. From this it would seem to be implied that the inspiration was not strong and continuous enough to last unbroken the whole poem through, but came in flashes. This deduction does not apply to many of the short poems, which appear to have been written under the influence of one sudden imperative impulse. Such masterpieces as Shelley's "Serenade," Tennyson's "Two Sisters," Browning's "Eurydice to Orpheus," Swinburne's "At Parting," Poe's "Israfel," and many others that might be easily mentioned, are cases in point, each one of which is fused together into a harmonious and flawless whole. Their vital force was strong enough to maintain them to the end, without any cessation or intermittence of its power. It was as steady and as uniform as the sunlight, and as vitalizing. But this glow of vitality in the longer poems flashes up and dies away fitfully; and the art of the poet, which

is at times only too apparent, consists in so vivifying by artificial means the lame and impotent parts that they take upon themselves the appearance of natural health and vigor. The skill with which this is done marks the art of the workman.

In fact, there can hardly be any doubt as to the soundness of the proposition that most poetical work is the result of the two processes of creation combined; and to find out in what proportions they were used is a matter of profound interest, not so much to the critic as to the young poet. For the ranks of the novices would be visibly and speedily augmented or diminished if it could be satisfactorily demonstrated, on the one hand, that great results might be expected solely from continued practice in the application of artistic methods, or, on the other hand, that no amount of industry alone could succeed in constructing a perfectly poetical stanza.

In these days, when versifying has become almost contemptibly easy and common, and when each young graduate feels himself authorized to spread his rhythmical wings to every passing and fleeting passion, it would not be an undesirable consummation if he had some means of knowing just how high he might aspire. But with the varying use of the term art, as employed by those whom he has come to look upon as teachers, and with the consequent varying estimate of its possibilities and limitations, he naturally becomes bewildered, and either hurries breathlessly to the nearest book-store for a *Rhymester* or an *Aid to Composition*, or throws aside his pen in despair. But it must be confessed that whatever de-

pressing influences the teachings of those may contain who give small credit to the artistic theory, and who hold mainly to the inspired one, they have not been sufficient to check the deplorable tendency toward an undue increase in poetical, or rather rhythmical, work, which has no reason for being beyond the gratification it affords the amateur author.

America particularly is cursed with what may not inconsistently be called this sterile overproductiveness, which not only seriously impairs the income of professional and earnest writers, but also brings the divine gift of song into a deserved contempt. Indeed, there is such a reckless rush into print on the part of the poetlings who have nothing to say, but who, thanks to their familiarity with artistic methods, say it only too facilely, that the true poet may well hesitate a moment before entering his own heavenly gift into competition with their too mechanical song.

There are a few men, however, among the younger generation of Americans, who combine in an eminent degree the two processes of work alluded to previously, and who, in the natural order of things, will be called to the front ranks of leaders and masters of their times. Chief among these is Henry Willard Austin, of Massachusetts, whose work in all the essentials of perfect song is so incomparably superior to that of his immediate contemporaries that a brief review of his poetry and his methods is not without reason.

Mr. Austin is the grandson of that William Austin lately eulogized by Colonel Higginson in *The Independent*

as "the Precursor of Hawthorne," and whose short stories "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man," "Joseph Natterstrom," "The Man with the Cloaks," etc., attracted much attention sixty years ago. William Austin was a distinguished lawyer of Boston, as was also his son, Henry's father, the latter (who held the office of Collector of the Port under President Buchanan) having written some creditable poetry. Our poet therefore comes of an intellectual and a literary family.

Mr. Austin is still a young man, and has the best years of his life before him. But he has already done some work that not only gives admirable promise, but that would be creditable to a poet of any age. Indeed, a critic as distinguished as Mr. James Russell Lowell has recently said, "I am glad to find in Mr. Austin a new poet,—for such he certainly is."

Although Mr. Austin is a New Englander by parentage and birth, his poetry is decidedly Southern in its characteristics, in its profuse imagery and warm coloring. This is perhaps partially accounted for by the fact that he has passed but little time in his native home. After leaving college, he travelled extensively in China, Japan, India, and Egypt, and lived for a year in Australia. Upon his return to this country he entered into practical journalism, connecting himself successively and successfully with papers in Baltimore, Washington, New Orleans, and Hot Springs, Ark. During all this time his pen has not been idle in the higher spheres of literature; but latterly he has returned to Massachusetts, where he is at present devoting himself to literary pursuits. It will thus be seen

that the Puritan elements of his ancestry have had ample opportunity to become largely modified in his composition by new and contrary environments. In fact, the wide humanitarianism of Mr. Austin's verse can easily be accounted for by the diverse experiences of a classical education, travel in usually unvisited countries, and practical work in various cities of America.

Mr. Austin, in addition, has written much very good prose, and has just completed two novels, which will shortly be published. One of them deals with certain phases of Oriental life that came under his personal observation and even within his personal experiences. He also contemplates publishing at an early day a little volume of his poetry,—an excellent idea, as most of his poems deserve a better fate than the ephemeral fame of newspapers and magazines. His work has met with cordial reception from editors, and his poems have appeared in all the leading journals and monthlies. But it is not so much with the history of the man or of his productions that we have to do as with the quality of the productions themselves.

A most casual inspection of Mr. Austin's poetry is sufficient to show that, however much he may be conversant with the rules and principles of metrical construction, and however skilfully he may apply them, he is possessed of the finer mental quality without which all the art in the world is but as an unlit torch. He has the imagination, which is as much the soul of poetry as harmony is its flesh; and he has the harmony, too, that exquisite and only combination that distinguishes poetry

from prose and verse. His poems are full of the most vivid imagery, set in the most artful phrases. An admirable example of his work is found in "The Chickadee," a sonnet, published recently in the *Century*, as follows:

When trees stand mute with bare, protesting
arms

Against the grayness of November skies,
Wherein the menace of a snow-storm lies;
When bushes all have lost their mellow charms—
Save the witch-hazel, whose dim stars appear
In quaintest mockery of its fabled powers
Like pallid ghosts of golden summer hours;
When winds seem sighing for the dying year;
When not a bird that mated in the Spring's
Elusive Eden dares to linger near,
Even to sing farewell, but spreads his wings
And, aiming south, shoots off with sudden fear
Of the cold clouds foreshadowing snows to be—
Then long and strong of song is heard the
Chickadee.

It is doubtful if any sonnet in the English language contains more striking images than the foregoing,—“the bare, protesting arms” of the November trees, the “pallid ghosts of golden summer hours,” the plaintive sigh for “Spring’s elusive Eden.”

In common with most of the young generation of poets, Mr. Austin has been impressed with the plentiful lack of variety in English metres, and he has attempted a number of metrical effects which are eminently successful. Although many of them are somewhat akin to the early French constructions, his genius has been too personal to allow him to follow blindly any of the fixed forms. A good case in point is his poem “Haunted,” published in the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, where modifications of a key-phrase gradually narrow the spacial idea to a fixed and

personal point, when it swells out again to a universal triumph:

Within this empty house
Now sports the furtive mouse
Where late my darling played
Light as a shade.

Within this lonely room
Ah! how she used to bloom,
Singing in golden hours
Of love and flowers.

Within this heart she crowned
Passion with peace profound,
Making Death’s shadow seem
Less than a dream.

Within this soul she sleeps:
She is not dead: but keeps
Silence, with marble smile,
A little while.

Within this life there is
Much cloud of mysteries;
But through the darkest night
Her star shines bright.

Within this Universe
Pain is Perfection’s nurse;
Yet Faith her way can find—
Not always blind.

Within this heaven of Love,
This soul that looks above,
This heart that doth not break,
She sleeps—to wake!

This is apparently very simple; its art is not at first visible. But it has a subtle undercurrent of thought which, with its perfection of technique, makes it a very strong poem indeed. The skilful variation of the key-phrase is artistic in the extreme, and worthy of careful notice. The locale is gradually narrowed through the first and second stanzas, until in the third and fourth, narrowing still more, it sets in motion

an impulse of spiritual expansion, which in the fifth and sixth rises from the personal to the universal, and which in the seventh swells to its climax in the recognition of the immeasurable spaces of spirit-life and in the solemn certainty of Love's ultimate and triumphant resurrection.

Another fine example of his artistic handling of a key-phrase is in "Bohemian Days," a retrospect that was published in *Our Continent*. Here the key-phrase is used as an echo or refrain to each of the twenty-one stanzas with admirable effect. The poet, in an apostrophe to an estranged friend and comrade, recalls the trifles of their early Bohemian existence, notes them

Through a misty brightness,
Perhaps the brightness of the tear they raise.

He recalls

The old machine at which my Love sat sewing
And humming loud my favorite Scottish lays,
Till from her bosom the full tune came flowing
And the birds listened in the dear, dead days.

The ancient fiddle that you used to fondle,
Dear Max, and make us glad in sudden ways,
With clamoring rondelay and amorous rondel—
Oh! you had genius in the dear, dead days!

She stands beside me with the sun's caresses
On the red gold that down her bosom strays.
O sunset kisses upon auburn tresses,
Ye seemed God's blessing on the dear, dead days!

O Sacred Love! how could she fade so quickly—
Like a fair fruit-tree ere its top displays
One blossom—Ah! the rain-drops fell too thickly
On our young garden in the dear, dead days.

O Love, sweet Love, my first, last, only
treasure!

Will she not send me ere my faith decays
A single smile that I beyond the azure
May see Heaven dawn for all our dear, dead
days?

Mr. Austin, again, like most young poets of the day, has written a good deal in the Swinburnian vein,—verses of rich musical effect and erotic fervor, as for instance:

O Love, if Life be all,
If at the curtain's fall
There be no more:
Still it is much to know
That we, Love, have loved so
As none before.

And you sighed, "O Love, what a bright
world this is,
Now that I love you, as you love me,
With every wave of my soul's great sea!"
And your rose-lips flamed into rosier kisses.

In striking contrast both to the matter and to the manner of these two examples is "My Little Wife," published some years ago in the *Century*:

She isn't very pretty
(So say her lady friends),
She's neither wise nor witty
With verbal odds and ends;

No fleeting freaks of Fashion
Across her fancy run,
She's never in a passion—
Except a tender one.

Her voice is low and cooing;
She listens more than speaks;
While others talk of doing,
The duty near she seeks.

It may be but to burnish
The sideboard's scanty plate;
Or but with bread to furnish
The beggar at the gate.

And if I could be never
Her lover and her mate,
I think I'd be forever
The beggar at the gate.

Some of Mr. Austin's flights of fancy sweep to the bounds of the material world, as when he says,—

Give me the skies for a scroll,
For a pen, thy soul,
Beloved—and I will write
Stars . . . !

And again,

When the morning stars sang together
That mystical song so wondrous
With a music more than thund'rous
High in the purple above
And low in the vast vault under us,
Universe, whisper me whether,
In that dawn of golden weather,
Low in the vast vault under us
And high in the purple above,
When they sang that song together
(From whose echo may no time sunder us!),
The burden thereof was not Love?

Numerous other examples could be given of Mr. Austin's artistic facility in the treatment of diverse themes; but one more must suffice, "A Dream," which is written in a variation of the rondel form:

Could I be a Rose for a sweet, swift hour,—
A passionate, purple, perfect flower,—
Not a breath would I spare to the vagrant air,
For the woodland warbler I would not care;
But oh, if my human lover came,
Then would I blush like a heart of flame—
Like a heart of flame I would send a sigh,
A note of perfume, when he drew nigh,
That should make him take me ere bees could sip,
That should woo him to me with blooming lip;
Till, his kisses culling the flower of me,
My petals close on his lips would close,
And—once more a Woman I think I'd be,
Could I be a Rose!

Some of the best of Mr. Austin's poems have appeared in the CONNOISSEUR, notably "That Day" and "Night-fall in Louisiana."

What attracts immediate attention in a perusal of Mr. Austin's poetry is his unusual command of metres. The variety of his metrical forms is aston-

ishing, and calls to mind the facile genius of Swinburne. Hardly any two of his poems are written in the same key. These may be considered minor points in comparison with the ethical quality—the thought-value—of poetry; but they are elements that go far toward making up the harmonious whole—the quickening, by expression, of that sense of beauty which is, after all, the ultimate charm and touch-tone of poetry. Take as an example the melodious love-song called "At Dawn:"

Kiss me once more, I pray,
Ere Night and I depart
No longer dare I stay
Or dally or delay,
Because, so sweet thou art,
The envious gossip, Day,
Would throw a golden dart
At Passion's purple heart
And thus our love betray,
Our rapture slay—
And so farewell, fair Love, farewell and
well-a-day!

One of the striking characteristics of his verse is its presentation of some pictorial idea. There is "the vision," certainly,—“the light that never was on sea or land.” This characteristic is well exhibited in the following fragments:

As when autumn winds
Chase truant echoes down the bosomy hills
Into the cave of Silence.

An old, old man
Bent over as if looking for his grave.

The ethical quality is nearly always represented in Mr. Austin's poetry. This treatment of it is shown in "Œdipus:"

ŒDIPUS.

STROPHE.

I have lived many lives in many lands,
 And much of evil hath my nature stained;
 But I have felt since touching of thine hands
 That evil is not in my soul engrained.

The dust and sweat of the world's tournament
 Are on me, and the battle is not done,
 Because the fiery spirit must have vent
 Till the night cometh or the prize be won.

What night? Ah me! the double night of
 Death,
 That clouds and shadows Love's serenest noon:
 What prize? Is any worthy so much breath
 As would suffice on thy sweet lips to swoon?

Is life worth living? I have heard thee ask,
 And then reply to silence with a sigh;
 But I who in thy smiles have learned to bask
 Have thus unlearned my old desire to die.

ANTISTROPHE.

Life *is* worth living. I who tropic-born
 Have chased its butterflies from boyhood's morn;

Who, early lost in Folly's flowery maze,
 Have lowered my nature in a million ways,—
 Now lift it up and lay it on the shrine
 Of a high passion, high and pure as thine:
 A passion warm as sunlight, yet as tender
 As is the maiden moon's midsummer splendor
 When the stars tremble in the melting skies
 Like tears of happiness in angels' eyes—
 Like tears of happiness! O Love, if I
 For man do aught of good that shall not die:
 If I, despite my frequent fall and sin,
 Make the world better for my having been,
 And go down calmly to an honored end;
 'Twill be, O Love, because thou didst descend
 Upon me, as of old the soft, swift dove,
 Bringing to Life's dark ark the olive-branch of
 love.

Many other passages of equal tenderness and tone could be given; but enough have been taken to show the exquisite artistic touch of the young poet, an artistic touch set in motion and guided by the divine instinct of insuperable song.

RICHARD NIXON.

